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THINGS ABOVE.

A SERMON

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BY

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THINGS ABOVE.

"Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth."—
COL. iii., 1.

I lately met with the following passage in the Life of one of the leaders of our time, as written by himself:—

"I suffered in my early life great anxieties about religious experiences and about doctrinal truth. These I conquered by a habit of prayer, which I formed with great difficulty and obstinate persistence,—led to it by reading the biographies of the saints, Brainerd among others, and by gradually acquiring a sense of God, which set aside the childish images of a form and put me into the possession of my spiritual senses. I can recall the day and hour when I first felt a reliance upon the witness of the Spirit with my spirit. It is like my memory of the first time I trusted to the buoyancy of the water, and, after two years of being in it without faith, suddenly found it, and so could swim."

This illustration from the experience of a young swimmer is perfect, and states perfectly the case of what I always call "the great experiment"; the experiment, namely, of prayer. I am afraid that the statement from the biography may seem to some young people unintelligible, because outside of their experience in that form. But there are others, as young as they, to whom such communion with God is so entirely a thing of course that to them the unintelligible thing is that anybody should make this confession in his biography. To older people, the experience will recall experiences of their own. The older they are, the more certain is it that they will sympathize with the writer. There is no way in which we demonstrate the being of God to another. I might just as well demonstrate to a frightened child on the beach that salt water will certainly float him. Nobody proves God's being. But, all of a sudden, one finds God is here. One speaks, and God answers. And thereafter all is sure. Afterward, you wonder that you

did not see it before. You cannot help seeing it now. It is like one of those hidden forms in the amusing puzzle-pictures. Before you see it, nobody can help you to make it out. Of a sudden, the shape flashes upon you; and then you cannot understand why you did not find it before.

This has always been as true as it is now; and it is the great central truth which found expression so long ago,—as long ago as Moses' farewell to Israel,—in words which are to me among the dearest words of what I sometimes call our "South Congregational Liturgy,"—

"If ye seek me, surely ye shall find me, if ye seek for me with all your hearts."

If, in life, we try to draw with any precision the line between people who succeed and those who fail, we shall find that those who succeed are those who "fix their affections on things above, and not on things on the earth." The words stare out from the Epistle, as some of these epigrams of Paul's do; and one feels for the moment that there need be nothing else in the whole Bible, that this is the whole story. Everything follows, Paul would have said, where one thus begins. This writer, whom I have cited, started with this fixing his affection on something higher than himself. He had not heard God with the ear,—no. He had not seen him with the eye,—no. But he thanked him. He honored him. So far, he loved him. He fixed his affection on him. And so the time came when he did see God, as the pure in heart see him; heard him as one hears him who needs his consolations; and trusted him, as a loving swimmer trusts the loyal waves. On the other hand, how clearly you see what follows, where the affection has been placed, as Paul says, "on things on the earth." This poor tramp, who comes in to you to beg, bringing the very atmosphere and smell of dirt and disease with him, is clearly enough a man who has put his affection on things below. He cannot look you square in the face as he makes his appeal. He wants first a quarter-dollar. If you will not give that, he wants a coat; if that fails, a pair of shoes. You turn the conversation to the chance of finding work, and he is not interested. You try to rouse his sympathies by asking about wife or child, and he has neither. No, for the man is what he is, because very early in life he put his affection on some very earthly things. It was liquor, or it was cards, or it was something to eat. What higher tastes he had, he blunted. What lowest tastes he had, he encouraged. There

is element of beast in us all. He made the most of this element. There is element of angel in us all. He made nothing of that element. It is a pity that the vulgar phrase has become vulgar; for it expresses, under the old symbolic language of the dark ages, the precise truth. Vulgar people say of such a man, in their coarse phrase, that he has "gone to the devil." That is, in symbolic language, just what he has done. He has not turned his affection on God, nor on heaven, nor on anything beautiful; not on anything above him, not on anything large or grand; not on any master whom he obeyed, not on any woman whom he loved, not on any friend whom he respected. On the other hand, he has placed his affection on the taste of food or of drink. He has tried to have a soft bed or an easy day. He has tried not to work. He has tried to live as a hog lives. He has placed his affection on things below. He has tested that statement, which I quoted the other day, which Lord Byron puts into the mouth of Satan, where Satan says,—

"He that bows not to God has bowed to me."

And the poor tramp finds, alas! that the statement is true.

Now there are a great many people who would disown the name of being "religious," who would say they could make little of religious books, and that they were themselves quite outside the religious line, who ought to take real comfort in knowing that all any teacher asks of them is that they will place their affections above, and not on things on the earth. I remember a man came to me once, and said he could make nothing of religion because he did not believe that the first chapter of the Book of Genesis was literally true. I had to tell him that it was of very little consequence in comparison what anybody believed about the first chapter of Genesis; but that the important thing is whether I am setting my affection on things above my present self, or whether I am setting it on myself, or whether I am setting it on things below myself. There are saints in heaven who never heard of the Book of Genesis. But if I, by any machination or magic spell, should elevate myself or anybody else into any sphere which all angels of light might agree in calling heaven, it would be no heaven for me or for any one, while we had our affections fixed on things below,—fixed on our pretty selves, or fixed upon the food we ate or the drink we drank, or fixed upon the chirping of crickets or the flattery of fools.

Here is the basis of the advice I am always giving to young people,—to make the most of such chances as they have to see aged people intimately, to coax them to talk of life, and to take the impression life has given them. And the other practical rule belongs with this, which directs us to seek every day the society of some one whom we know to be a superior. To start squarely on an accomplishment, or only a hobby, which turns your affection to some thing or some power higher than yourself, is another application of the same principle. "The undevout astronomer is mad," Dr. Young says. And, in truth, you will not long collect your flowers and arrange them, or dry your ferns, your colored leaves, and your other specimens, or work out the laws of creation under which they are classified, and become familiar with Nature in her secret haunts,—you will not long fix your affection in this way on things quite above your logic or your comprehension without growing yourself into a higher life. A man of science once told me that one of the two great religious crises of his life was in the moment when he first put his eye to the eye-piece of a compound microscope. The truth was he then saw with his own eye the process of creation. It was as if he stood by when God set Orion in order, and started him on his journey through our winter sky. I have known another man of science who did all this, and yet fancied he was not religious. But, for me, all I could say to him was that he was profoundly religious, only he would not take the comfort of his religion. And, in truth, you will always find that, as men or women do fairly and steadily place their affection on things above them, their own lives enlarge, they tread under feet temptation, they know more the joy of living, and real success waits upon their endeavors.

Carry the same principle to explain the suggestion of the author with whom I began, as to reading biographies of the men who are allied with God. He speaks of the Life of Brainerd, a man, I am afraid, not now often cited or remembered. Brainerd was a man who did not know what fear was. He went among the Indians of the then savage valleys of the Susquehanna and the Ohio, with the first lesson of love and light that was ever carried to them. Such a life as his, gaining its real strength from God, communicates that strength, long after Brainerd is dead and forgotten, to other lives. For, as you read, you cannot escape the conviction

that, unless this daring pioneer was a fool, he knew where his power came from. Well, clearly he was no fool. I must then trust him, when he says he sought almighty strength and found it, asked for it and received it. So you read Milton's Life, and you find that he believed that he had strength higher than his own, and light outside his own, for such work as the serving of his country or the composition of *Paradise Lost*. You read Luther's Life, and you find the same steadfast reliance on the Holy Spirit. You find St. Bernard civilizing Western Europe by his reliance on Almighty God as his daily helper. Now, you know these men are not simpletons. You know that the world has pivoted upon them, and they did not give way. It would not be the world it is, had they not served it. You read their lives to look for their secret. And they all say that they could not do these things themselves. They say that they put their affection on things above. They sought help from the Infinite Power, which moves the world, from which men are born, which makes right conquer and makes wrong fail. They say they sought him, and that they found him. You cannot help placing some degree of credence in their assertion. When you find it backed by the experience of the successful world, you cannot but wish to try the same experiment. You set your affection on things above ; and you ask for God's partnership in your endeavor, just as they have done.

For, if you set your affection on things above, you escape from the smallness of the narrow horizon of your little separate life. One does not wonder if you sicken of that. It is monotonous, and it is petty. It would be queer, if you did like it always. Outside of this little life, so petty and alone so tedious, there is the larger movement: it is the infinite movement of the universe. It is the movement in which Good conquers Evil, in which Truth sets foot on Falsehood. Now, if you choose, you may gnaw out of the bands which shut you dead in your close cocoon, you may mount on angel-wings, may enter into the courses of this unending life, and be a partner in the universe. You may confide with God, and he may confide with you. Yes! I understand that this seems too great to believe, but certainly not too great to try, certainly worth trying if one be tired of that imprisonment, as a chrysalis in its bandages. The grub in the cocoon has a perfect right to say that his imprisonment cannot end. But the grub is not such a fool as to say that. He tries. He gnaws out, and, lo! he soars on purple wing. You, too,

might say it was your nature to be always hedged and cabined and confined. But you, too, are no fool. You hear the voice of your fathers, and your fathers' fathers, testifying that those who try succeed, that those who ask are answered, that those who pray receive an answer to their prayers. Nay, so full is this answer, and so certain, that prophets have written down the word which they have heard from God himself.

"If ye seek me, surely ye shall find me, if ye seek for me with all your hearts."

To all which, I can hear my young friends replying that these Lives of Milton and Cromwell, of Heber and Brainerd, of Mrs. Tait and Mrs. Ware, may not prove entertaining,—may prove dull or even slow, may prove hard reading, and dry. I have not said otherwise. True, I will say that the development of character, and that of noble and pure and successful character, is the highest theme with which even romance can deal, whose business it is to be entertaining. And I will say that the noblest biographies stand well by the side even of the noblest romances, merely in the matter of interest. But that is not the thing which concerns us here. I have not asked you to read these lives of true men and women because they are entertaining. I urge it because it is an important and well-nigh necessary part of training for life. I dare say that when you first went to dancing-school you did not want to go, and it was necessary to compel you. Still, I do not see that you dislike the dancing party to-day, because of that disagreeable beginning. And so you did not like your French teacher, and "hated French," if I may use the spirited vocabulary of childhood. Still, I see that now you like a good French novel, when one is found for you. Set aside in a much larger matter this miserable business of likes and dislikes, and choose the reading, dry or entertaining, which shall bring you into report with the men and women who have blessed and helped mankind.

Step by step, you find how it is that life is enlarged and inspired, so that it is no longer petty and material. You find what it is that lifts a man above this narrow thought of what he likes and what he does not like, into that larger current of the infinite motive of the universe. You have a glimpse of the way in which other men have risen from the poor little code of personal morals,—a code hardly larger

than the etiquette in which a man trims his nails or smooths his hair,—and you have entered into the movement of the religious life in which a man does what angels do, because he is an angel; nay, does what God wishes him to do, because he is a child of God. This is what the old books, perhaps too mechanically, called the experiencing of religion. This is the enlargement of separate or atomic life, so that one becomes a partner in God's concerns, and a partaker of his nature. I do not wonder that he whose experience I read you found his guides into this life in the biographies of the saints, or men of success who had gone there before him. They taught him, you see, their talisman. They made him look outside himself and above himself. They compelled him to fix his affection on things above. And so he learned to pray.

In a fashion, and a very noble and elevating fashion, we learn to pray at our mother's knees. And there is many and many a noble man and saintly woman who has never needed to learn more of prayer than was there taught them. To say, "Our Father, who art in heaven"; to say, "Now I lay me down to sleep," with the confidence and eagerness with which a child asks and receives,—may well open up the whole habit of personal prayer, so that one shall "experience religion" in infancy, nor ever find the lesson in any sort new. Only let child or man be sure that intercourse with this Power who makes for righteousness, and who is always eager to make for righteousness, shall be frequent, simple, personal, and never dependent on a form. Let child or man be sure that in conscious thought,—in spoken words, if he choose, but that is indifferent,—in conscious thought he open to God all his wishes, all his hopes, and all his fears. Child or man, let us come to God, not as if we were asking the conundrum whether he is or what he is, but with the loyal confidence of those who thank him for life, want to enter his life, and want him to enter ours. It is not to ask him for gold or silver, it is not to ask him that after death we may enter a bower of roses and myrtle, it is not to ask him that our ship may float, while in the tempest another ship goes down. It is to tell him of to-day's success or of its failure; it is to turn over with him the plan for to-morrow's adventure or amusement; it is to lay out in order this perplexity and that misfortune, and gain light from higher life as to the solution of the puzzle or redemption from the failure.

For us who are hot-tempered, it is calmly to cool passion

in the infinite ether ; for those who are indolent, it is to feel the thrill and glow of the great line of battle, as the knight most lazy would surely put his lance in rest, and charge with the others, if some Richard led the way. For him who is downcast, because he is alone, prayer is to find that he is not alone. No ! Here are all men and women, all angels and arch-angels, all cherubim, seraphim, and the host of heaven are on our side : nay, God himself, the present power of present love, is here, strength and companionship. Prayer quits the humdrum of my own separate life, and introduces me thus into the society of the universe. It lifts me above the dust and malaria of the things around me into the high, clear air, where I see as I am seen.

It is to this contemplation that the apostle invites me, when he asks me to fix my affection on things above. As Jesus had done before him, when he asked me to place my treasure where moth would not eat and rust would not gnaw.

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

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